

Ad Experimentum: Merton's Early Essays

Review of

Early Essays, 1947-1952

By Thomas Merton

Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell

Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo

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Reviewed by **John E. Allard, OP**

The publication of Thomas Merton's twelve early essays, previously dispersed among issues in six different periodicals and now collected in one volume, is a cause for celebration. Not only is it a fitting event for Merton's centenary year, but it also continues the project of bringing forth the old and the new from the Merton corpus and making it available for study and for the spiritual enrichment of readers. With the several essays being gathered in one place, an additional benefit emerges in the form of intriguing questions concerning Merton's early career as a writing monk, who must sort his way through theological questions, the meaning of his writing in the context of his religious vocation, and the demands of writing for a wide audience.

The book organizes the collection of essays into two parts. The first six essays (Part I) were all published in lay-edited *The Commonweal*, and represent both Merton's focus on the dynamics of contemplative life ("Poetry and the Contemplative Life," "Active and Contemplative Orders" and "Is Mysticism Normal?") and his treatment of matters that might be considered of more general interest ("The Trappists Go to Utah," "A Christmas Devotion" and "Self-Denial and the Christian"). The remaining six constitute Part II, and made their appearance in *The Dublin Review* (eventually incorporated in *The Month*) and several periodicals no longer in print: *Integrity*, *The Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, *Cross and Crown*, *Action Now!* Here, too, the essays devote themselves either to a sustained discussion of the contemplative life ("Contemplation in a Rocking Chair," "The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity" and "The Primacy of Contemplation") or to topics of a general spiritual interest ("Death of a Trappist," "A Trappist Speaks on People, Priests and Prayer" and "Christ Suffers Again").

Merton himself hoped to bring together the essays into book form, as editor Patrick O'Connell notes in his Introduction (xx). The project, although on Merton's mind for several years, was not carried out. O'Connell has, then, brought Merton's intention to realization while also giving the reader the help of his deft comments about the provenance and biographical context of each essay. Even

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more, he provides two appendices that will prove of interest to the serious reader, not to mention the scholar. The first of these supplies textual notes by which one may trace revisions that were made to three of the essays. The second is a composite of materials that contextualize the reception of “Active and Contemplative Orders,” an essay which prompted biting criticism from John Fearon, OP. Merton, for his part, devoted some reflection in his journals to both Fearon’s critique and what he was trying to accomplish in his own work. The second appendix thus includes Fearon’s “States of Life,” originally published in *The Thomist*, as well as pertinent entries from Merton’s journals of January 1949.

In his Foreword, Jonathan Montaldo describes “Poetry and the Contemplative Life” as “[o]ne of the most important essays in this volume” (ix). It is easy to see why: here, quite near the beginning of his monastic writing career, Merton wrestles with the intrusion that artistic creativity introduces into the act of contemplation. In the context of this collection, “Poetry and the Contemplative Life” serves as the existential expression of the challenge, if not the dilemma, that Merton continually faced in the tension between his monastic calling and his writing. In light of this first essay, three other essays on contemplation (“Active and Contemplative Orders,” “The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity” and “The Primacy of Contemplation”) seem, in some way, to represent an attempt to address these and related questions in a more formal theological manner. And as O’Connell points out, when more specifically focused on contemplation, Merton’s essays seek to promote an understanding and appreciation of contemplation to an audience outside of the monastery. Of these, “Is Mysticism Normal?” and “Contemplation in a Rocking Chair” seem particularly oriented to a general audience. It was “Active and Contemplative Orders,” however, that generated controversy and whose significance may have been as personal as that found in “Poetry and the Contemplative Life.” Under the guise of discussing Thomas Aquinas’ analysis of the types of religious orders and their relative merits, Merton may have been working out the theological foundation for his own monastic-literary vocation. Aquinas’ adage *contemplare et aliis contemplata tradere* (to contemplate and to share with others the fruits of contemplation) seems an apt description of Merton’s own situation, even if its more usual use is to describe the mendicant teaching and preaching orders, such as the Dominican Order to which Aquinas, and Fearon, belonged. To my mind, “Active and Contemplative Orders,” along with “The Contemplative Life” and “The Primacy of Contemplation,” not only affirms the value of the contemplative life on a theological basis but also represents an attempt to discern the connection between one’s contemplative and ministerial identities. In the midst of distinguishing the official character of a religious order as contemplative or ministerial (or mixed) from the particular way of life that an individual might pursue within that order, Merton ran afoul of the rigorous application of technical terminology upon which a Thomist such as Fearon insisted. Once criticized, Merton offered the two subsequent essays named above, and argued for the pre-eminence of contemplation within the life of the Church by means of a somewhat broader use of the theological tradition while remaining conversant with Aquinas.

The remaining essays display Merton’s abilities to engage a variety of audiences, whether pious, curious or thoughtfully inquiring. “A Trappist Speaks on People, Priests and Prayer,” written for the devotional monthly *The Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, attempts to answer the question, what kind of priests should Catholics be praying for? Merton argues that the faithful ought to desire holy priests, prayerful and possessing a wisdom derived from prayer, thereby ended with a spirit by

which they respond generously to the demands of ordinary and humble tasks.

In “The Trappists Go to Utah” and “Death of a Trappist” Merton makes use of his penchant to identify an unusual detail, even if based on a misunderstanding, as the entry to an instructive discussion about Trappist life. In the one, it is the scene of Trappists aboard a sealed railway car in St. Louis as they await the next leg of their journey from Kentucky to Utah. In the other, the myth that Trappists go each day to dig and deepen the grave in which they will be buried allows Merton to discuss the attitude with which a Trappist meets death, and how it is formed in the midst of living one’s life prayerfully. “Self-Denial and the Christian” seeks to instruct a Catholic audience in a realistic attitude toward asceticism, whereby one is mindful of its rootedness in discipleship and of its constructive goal, “to bring peace to the soul” (70).

Lastly, “A Christmas Devotion” and “Christ Suffers Again” are meditations, in the first case, on the mystery of the Incarnation and, in the second, on the profound sinfulness of human discord and division, to be remedied by Christ alive in Christians. In both of these, we witness Merton carrying out the very activity at issue in his essays on contemplation: sharing with others the fruits of his own contemplation.

The general reader with a love and respect for Merton will find these essays of considerable interest, and may count them as a small treasure. Readers fascinated by the anomaly of Merton’s career, one who was caught up in a very public ministry while living the life of a secluded monk, will find material to ponder and interesting clues to consider. Scholars with an interest in mid-twentieth-century American Catholicism will see in the essays a possible reflection of larger currents, including the waning of Thomistic and Scholastic categories of thought during the 1950s and 1960s. In such a context, it is perhaps not a mistake that Merton failed to return to his more theologically technical essays. Whether or not this was the case, other genres proved to be more compatible with his monastic project: expositions of early monastic teaching, topical essays of current interest (eventually with a decidedly social-justice orientation), poetry, letters and personal journals. The pursuit of these or other possible lines of investigation will be able to rely on O’Connell’s expert editing. Indeed, Montaldo warmly acknowledges O’Connell’s achievements and service as a helpful and meticulous editor of the present and of previous volumes of Merton’s work. It is praise that one can only second.